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# JOINT COMMITMENT, HUMAN LIFE AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

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## *abstract*

*In this introductory chapter, we recall some of the crucial aspects of Gilbert's notion of joint commitment. Special attention is devoted to the importance of this notion both for human life in its social aspects (notably, the formation of group beliefs and the constitutions of just joint commitments) and for social ontology (in particular, for the understanding of norm and institutions and of the intentionality of groups). Then, we briefly summarize the contents of the contributions collected in the issue.*

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## *keywords*

*joint commitment, social ontology, human collective life*

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- 1. The san Raffaele spring school on joint commitment**
- The present issue of *Phenomenology and Mind*, “Joint Commitment: Collective Intentionality, Norms and Justice”, originates from the Spring School “Joint Commitment: Collective Intentionality, Trust, and Political Obligation” which was organized by the research centres PERSONA (Research centre in phenomenology and sciences of the person) and CeSEP (Research centre in public ethics) and took place at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University in June 15th-17th, 2015.
- The keynote speaker was, of course, Margaret Gilbert, the philosopher of the “joint commitment”, whose recent book (*Joint Commitment. How We Make the Social World*, 2013) was deeply discussed in the days of the School. Moreover, the school was animated by seventeen speakers – among invited speakers and contributed papers – from ten different countries. The contributed papers were selected in a double-blind review process by international reviewers from four different countries. The days of the Spring School were rich of collaboration and fruitful discussions among young scholars and affirmed philosophers, and this volume collects the great part of the papers presented and discussed at the school.
- 2. Joint commitment and human life**
- Joint commitment is the key-concept labelled by Margaret Gilbert to understand what we are talking about when we speak of what we do, think and feel and of our values, conventions and laws, and therefore to comprehend the structure of our social world. Joint Commitment is a very powerful concept both for our personal and public lives: “How is one to understand the sense of unity, of connection, the sense of the collective ‘we’? Given disparate human beings with their own personal beliefs, strivings, and so on, what kind of unity is possible? When we talk about our goals, beliefs, values, and so on—what are we talking about?” (Gilbert 2013, pp. 5-6).
- Throughout her writings, Gilbert argues that joint commitment is a fundamental part of human life, since it is at the core of fundamental everyday concepts (some of which, such as institutions, law, walking together, rights and obligations, helping behaviour, collective beliefs, actions and values, etc. are discussed in the contributions collected in this issue). As she puts it in her last book, her notion of joint commitment covers “a wide range of topics which fall the multifaceted domain of the philosophy of social phenomena” and help addressing “matters of great significance to several philosophical specialties – including ethics, epistemology, political philosophy, philosophy of science, and philosophy of law – and outside philosophy as well” (Gilbert 2013, p. 1).
- In the opening contribution of this volume, “Joint commitment: what it is and why it matters”, Gilbert argues that the appeal to joint commitment can be justified by way of the “rights

argument”, that is, she argues that joint commitment is the most plausible source of the rights inherent in central social phenomena. This approach to the justification of joint commitment is important since it emphasizes that joint commitment has to be understood as the key-concept in the explanation of the normativity of social phenomena. In doing so, Gilbert also suggests that social normativity has not to be confused with moral normativity.

The other contributions collected in the present volume discuss, more or less directly, Gilbert’s concept of joint commitment and point out its implications or even, more simply, its connections, both in a positive and negative perspective, with several crucial issues for the social ontology research agenda. Think of the issue of collective beliefs and the variable level of personal commitment and freedom they may imply, to the phenomenon of groups’ intentionality and the different forms of collective mental states, acts and actions in it involved, to the problem of the extreme variety of normativity (not just moral vs. social normativity, but also different types of social normativity) and its relation with institutions, norms and laws, and also to the question of the ground of political obligation and political justice and their possible relation with joint commitments. Thus, we decided to organize the articles in the following four sessions: (i) Collective beliefs, (ii) Groups’ intentionality, (iii) Shared norms, (iv) Just joint commitments.

The contributions collected in Session 1, “Collective beliefs”, deal with Gilbert’s notion of group belief, with a special focus on the relation among individual and collective doxastic attitudes.

In his contribution, “*Augur augurem videns... Belief and make-believe in social life*”, Wojciech Żelaniec focuses on the phenomenon of the “evanescence of the individual”, which characterizes our age and which he detects in Gilbert’s approach. Gilbert’s discourse concerning collective belief is dominated by the question whether the parties to the joint commitment behave in a certain way. On the contrary, “it is precisely that evanescent question – of whether the parties to a joint commitment (have to) believe severally that which they are jointly committed to believe – that is most interesting in the context of the ‘evanescence of the individual’”. Żelaniec suggests that in the complete lack of individual beliefs (i.e., if people are only educated to internalize the beliefs they are jointly committed to believe) we can have at best “pretended beliefs” leading to something like a “collective schizophrenia”.

Silvia Tossut’s paper, “On acting *because of* a joint commitment”, tackles the issue of the obliteration of the individual too, though she focuses on individual preferences. By using a game theoretical approach, Tossut shows that the Gilbert’s holistic interpretation of joint commitment entails the obliteration of individual preferences, and that this makes it irrational to abandon whatever joint commitment.

Leo Townsend, in his paper on “Joint commitment and collective belief: a revisionary proposal”, suggests a way out the debate between Gilbert and rejectionism (the thesis that gilbertean collective beliefs amount to acceptances). Townsend argues that Gilbert’s account should be revised by saying that when people are jointly committed to believe, “the sort of commitment forged is a commitment to *p* as true, not a commitment to having the belief that *p*”; thus, he argues for “a broadening of the notion of joint commitment to include collective doxastic commitments”.

Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl’s contribution, “Epistemic Authority and Manipulation: Exploring the ‘Dark Side’ of Social Agency”, is not directly concerned with collective beliefs, but tackles the related issue of the way in which people can *manipulate* each other beliefs. The author introduces the notion of “cognitive dissonance”, and analyzes an interesting case of manipulation, i.e. that of a beaten woman. Rinofner-Kreidl’s main concern is “to figure out

### **3. Joint commitment in the social ontology debate**

#### **3.1 Joint commitment and collective beliefs**

how the ideas of reason and (epistemic) authority are connected with the social constitution and self-understanding of the agents involved”, and she argues for a distinction between objective and social authority.

### 3.2 Joint commitment and groups’ intentionality

Session 2, “Groups’ intentionality”, deals with the relation between the groups and the individuals constituting them, in particular with the issue of the relation between genuine groups, which have joint or collective intentions, commitments, feelings, etc., and mere aggregates or sums of individuals.

Adopting (even if implicitly) a very phenomenological attitude, Jacob Heim, in his paper “Commitments in Groups and Commitments of Groups”, takes seriously the existence of groups and focuses on the experience of groups’ commitments that we can have in everyday life. Heim shows that such experience is not reducible to that of the sum of the commitments of individual group members. First, Heim distinguishes between the individual level of commitments, owed to the group members, and the group level of commitments, which “the group as a single body owes either to itself or to some third party”. Second, Heim distinguishes between the *content* and the *holder* of a commitment: “even when individual-level and group-level commitments have the same content, they are understood to have different holders”. These distinctions allow him to make sense of the experience of groups’ intentionality, and in particular of groups’ commitments, as such.

Francesca De Vecchi’s contribution, “The Plural Subject Approach to Social Ontology and the Sharing Value issue”, inquires the role played by values for the creation of social unity and groups and for their maintenance in existence. This is a topic quite neglected in social ontology and also in Gilbert’s social ontology of plural subjects. In referring to Max Scheler’s axiology, De Vecchi points out the need of a values account that adequately considers the contribution of shared and collective values for unifying and binding people together in stable groups.

Glenda Satne and Alessandro Salice focus on the phenomenon of “Helping behaviour and joint action in young children” and show that Warneken, Tomasello et alia’s (2006) attempt to explain helping behavior in young children assuming the validity of Bratman’s theory of shared intentions as the right explanation of joint actions, faces several problems. Satne and Salice suggest that instead of Bratman’s idea of “weak” interdependence, Tomasello et alia should better adopt a “robust” idea of interdependence, according to which “individual intentions are not based on individual intentions but are themselves dependent on collective intentions”. Such robust interdependence is adopted by those philosophers that describe the phenomenon of collective intentionality not as distributive, but rather as genuinely collective – that is, as the intentionality of a group, or of a *we*. Needless to say, among such authors, beside Raimo Tuomela and John R. Searle, there is, Margaret Gilbert with her account of joint commitment.

Gian Paolo Terravecchia’s “A Phenomenology of Social Stances” develops a phenomenology of social stances, that is of intentional acts of taking a position about something, and aims to show that Gilbert’s joint commitment account is grounded in just one or two of the several stances which may characterize collective acting. Terravecchia argues that joint commitment needs *accepting* or *assenting*, while there are at least other three stances to be discussed about the creation of collective phenomena. These are: *refusing* (or *rebellling against*), *suffering*, and *making something one’s own*. Very interestingly, indeed, Terravecchia points out that Gilbert (as other social ontologists and scientists) tends to reduce the phenomenon of acting together to the phenomenon of joint acting, in the sense of acting in accordance with someone, and to the corresponding joint commitments. Yet, in some cases of collective acting, such as rebellion, people act together with others, without the implication of any joint commitment, and

without the presence of any common goal (at least, among opponents) or social obligation. Thus, Terravecchia concludes that if one aims to account of the phenomenon of collective acting, one should consider the several stances, that is, the complex reality, in which collective acting may be grounded.

The papers collected in the third session, “Shared Norms”, discuss, more or less directly, a common, general claim: normativity is said in many ways, and the normativity of social or shared norms is a very multifaceted phenomenon.

Francesco Guala’s paper tackles the problem of “The Normativity of Institutions” and argues against the main trend in social ontology (Gilbert included) to ground the normativity of institutions in collective intentionality. Guala’s claim derives from the assumption that there are different kinds of normativity and that in social ontology normativity is rather considered just as a product of collective intentionality. Thus, Guala argues that “many social institutions do not rely on normative commitments engendered by a joint intention”, “that there is a viable alternative theory of institutions, and that normativity plays a different role in this theory than the one it plays in the collective intentionality programme”. Guala shows that institutions are not necessarily characterized by the normativity of joint commitment, and holds that they are, rather, sets of *rules in equilibrium*, whose main function is to indicate actions promoting coordination and cooperation. “Each rule codifies a behaviour – a set of actions – that solves a problem of coordination”.

Joshua Keaton’s “The Social Impact Theory of Law” suggests that Gilbert’s work on the “normativity of joint commitment can help resolve the intractable debate on legal normativity in philosophy of law”, going beyond both Mark Greenberg’s recent call to eliminate the problem of legal normativity, by grounding it in moral facts, and Hart’s thesis that moral and legal obligations should be held distinct. Keaton proposes what he calls the *Social Impact Theory* (SIT), a substantial variation on the theme on Greensberg’s Moral Impact Theory (MIT), according to which the rules that institutions recognize, promulgate, enforce, and practice give rise to “legal obligations, which are just various descriptions and entailments of our pre-existing social commitments – legal normativity is just an expression of rational commitment to group decision-making”. Therefore SIT, like MIT, “has no need to posit a unique type of normativity”. Seumas Miller’s “Joint Political Rights and Obligations” proposes a very interesting taxonomy of rights and obligations in moral, social and political spheres. Miller distinguishes between *moral rights*, which are *natural rights* because one possesses them by virtue of properties one has *qua* human being (think for instance to the natural moral right not to be tortured that is based on the human beings capacity to suffer physical pain), and *institutional moral rights*, which do not pre-exist to social institutions, but, rather, presuppose institutions, such as the moral right to vote. Moreover, Miller distinguishes between *institutional moral rights and obligations* (e.g. “the right to vote and the right to stand for office embody the human right to autonomy in the institutional setting of the state”) and *institutional rights and obligations that are not moral* (e.g. “the right to make the next move in a game of chess”: such right is “entirely dependent on the rules of chess and does not entail any moral element in it”). Finally, Miller introduces the category of *joint moral rights and obligations*, argues that “political rights and obligations are in large part joint (moral and institutional) rights and obligations”, and distinguishes them by *individual rights and obligations*. Very compellingly indeed, Miller’s taxonomy of rights and obligations aims to show that political rights and obligations may be both moral and joint, since they may depend both on properties we have *qua* human beings and on agreements and commitments individuals have freely decided to assume. In other words, Miller’ brings the moral normativity together with the social normativity in a very interesting way.

### 3.3 Joint commitment and shared norms

Lorenzo Passerini Glazel's contribution on "Shared Norms and Nomotrophic Behaviour" focuses on the phenomenon of *nomotrophic behaviour* (a variation on the theme of Amedeo G. Conte's *nomotropic behaviour*), described as the "behaviour which aims at the maintenance of a norm in the event of its infringement: it typically consists in a reaction to the (actual or possible) infringement of that norm". "The idea underlying the concept of nomotrophic behaviour is that a social norm that is repeatedly infringed with no reaction may slowly 'atrophy' and vanish (by 'desuetude'); and that its atrophy may be countered through different forms of nomotrophic behaviour". Very originally indeed, Passerini Glazel suggests to construe Gilbert's (2005) (and Devlin's (1959)) idea of "interventions in the lives of others when one thinks that the others' behaviour is wrong", and Niklas Luhmann (1972) concept of "reactions to disappointment of normative expectations" as cases of nomotrophic behaviour. According to Passerini Glazel, both rebukes and demands, in Gilbert's sense, are forms of nomotrophic behaviour. Moreover, he points out the fruitfulness of the concept of nomotrophic behaviour for social ontology in elucidating the epistemological and ontological implications of such concept concerning, respectively, the questions of the *inference of norms* from action and of the *existence of norms*.

#### **3.4 Joint commitment and justice**

The fourth session, "Just Joint Commitments", collects contributions dealing with the political consequences of joint commitment (where 'political' should be understood in a broad sense). All the authors of these papers deal with the ways in which joint commitment might be used to explain specific features of our societies and our living in society.

John Horton and Ryan Windeknecht hold that we do have associative political obligations, and argue against the thesis that such obligations are subordinate to principles of global redistributions (the "distributive objection"). The authors show that the two both associative obligation and principles of global redistribution are morally relevant and that only the more extreme claims made by the proponents of the distributive objection should be rejected.

Roberta Sala builds on the realist claim that there are people within liberal-democratic societies whose lives are not inspired by liberal values, and argues that joint commitment is an answer to the question of how those people may not coercively adhere to liberal institutions. Sala suggests that joint commitment can help in explain the notion of 'modus vivendi', if we understand the latter as "a way to be involved (and not coerced) in a social enterprise, more or less willingly, generally aiming at a peaceful coexistence".

In the last paper, Helen Lauer analyzes an important kind of collective endeavour: collusion. The author emphasizes the characteristics of collusion that illuminate some limits of Gilbert's account of joint commitment. For example, the fact that it is not rational for colluding agents to mutually express their readiness to collusion. Lauer suggestion is that there are covert norms and that collusion may be a rational response to prevailing covert norms; if we recognize this feature of the social environment, we have the possibility to understand (and correct?) "socially acceptable hypocrisy".

Thanks to the efforts of all the authors, the volume as whole results in a very intensive and stimulating discussion on the joint commitment concept and on other similar and near concepts which, together with the "joint commitment", constitute a conceptual map of the main interesting problems faced today by social ontology.